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ABSTRACT

The one personal relationship most vital to the health of the independent school is the one between the head of the school and the board of trustees. The relationship begins anew when the board is faced with the responsibility of identifying and appointing a new head. If this task is done carefully and well, all parties, in particular the school, will be the beneficiaries. This booklet provides suggestions to both trustees and prospective heads for handling effectively the various aspects of the selection process. It is useful to both parties to consider the process from their own and from one another's viewpoint. (Author/WM)

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THE SELECTION AND APPOINTMENT OF SCHOOL HEADS

A MANUAL of SUGGESTIONS to BOARDS of TRUSTEES and CANDIDATES

EA 005 615

National Association of Independent Schools

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Introduction

We have long felt that the one personal relationship most vital to the health of the independent school is that between the head of the school and its Board of Trustees. That relationship begins anew when the Board is faced with the responsibility of identifying and appointing a new head.

If this delicate and difficult task is done carefully and well, all parties, but particularly the school, will be the beneficiaries. It is in the hope of assisting the Boards of independent schools to handle effectively the various aspects of this process that this booklet has been prepared.

It will be noted that our suggestions are presented in two parts, one addressed to Trustees, the other to prospective heads. We have done this deliberately, in the belief that it will be useful to both parties in this process to consider it not only from their own but also from the other's viewpoint.

We are grateful to the many people who have read and commented on drafts of this text. A special debt is owed to a dedicated, wise and experienced woman trustee of a girls' school, who read this manuscript at the author's request. Having recently gone through the experience of selecting a new head for her school, she writes with authority. Her valuable suggestions and perceptive comments, adding a new flavor to the text, arrived just as we were going to press, and appear here as footnotes.

Frank R. Miller
Director of Administrative Services

November 1971

Copies of this booklet, at $1.00 each, may be ordered from

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS
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Part I

To the Board of Trustees

This is the most important job facing any Board of Trustees. If it is done well, the Board can look forward to years of harmonious, productive teamwork with the new head - not as many years, probably, as was true in the past when an easier, simpler campus ethos prevailed - but a goodly period, say, 8 to 15 years.[1] But if the job of choosing the new head is poorly or hastily done, the seeds of trouble will be quickly harvested. A year, two years - and the new head is out, often in an acrimonious dispute. Then, not only must the job be done all over again, but the whole school community will have suffered a body blow of unpredictable proportions.

Certainly no one can prescribe "the perfect way" to hire a head. Each school has special qualities, strengths, weaknesses and needs. Only its own Board can judge candidates in relation to those needs. But certain general guidelines for this selection process emerge from our witnessing and aiding in literally hundreds of "head-hunting" expeditions. Thus the following bits of advice are merely suggestions - which have proved helpful in the majority of the searches about which we know.

A. Before the selecting begins

First of all, when a change is in prospect - for whatever reason, be it retirement, resignation or Board decision - an announcement to that effect should be made public as soon as possible, for it can be most damaging to the entire school community to have this kind of news seep out unofficially, often accompanied by rumors and distortions. The ideal way to do this is through a simultaneous joint announcement by the President of the Board and the head of the school. The announcement may cause a stir for a few days, but if done properly things settle down remarkably quickly and everyone goes about his business.

The first step in this selection process is to choose a selection committee - or perhaps a better word is "search" committee. For some Boards tend to turn the whole selection process over to a committee, mentally absolving themselves of almost all further responsibility for choosing a new head. Members of this committee should be representative of the various

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[1] I question this as possibly too high an expectation - 5 to 8 years seems more realistic. It may be worth pointing out that even though the school's head may change more often, it is not necessarily an indication of the school's decline. Today's heads need more refreshment, will switch schools more often, may even change careers completely.

points of view within the Board,[2] interested in the assignment, knowledgeable about the school, and, above all, willing and able to give this delicate and difficult job the time it requires.

Then, when the selection (or, better, search) committee[3] has been appointed, an important preliminary stage begins for the Board. This should involve a realistic appraisal of the school, considering where it was five years ago, where it is today, and where the Board wants it to be five to ten years from now. Incidentally, it can be an important "review-and-refresher" exercise for the entire Board. The appraisal must be completely honest and should spell out the Board's thinking as specifically as possible. For instance, if the Board says it wants the school to be "liberal", its idea of "liberal" may be vastly different from the candidates' ideas of "liberal". So it would be wise to define such terms carefully. It makes little sense for a Board to "sell" a candidate on an over-idealized picture of their school, only to have him discover the real picture after he is in office. The resulting disenchantment helps to shorten headmasters' terms of office.

Next, the committee should make a realistic analysis of the position it is seeking to fill. Many committees have erred here simply because they do not realize the number, variety, and complexity of the demands on the outgoing head's time and energy. Thus the committee should develop and get down on paper a careful and realistic job description, taking into consideration what part of the job only the head can do, what part he's responsible for while delegating its execution, and what can be lifted off his shoulders by an assistant head, business manager, or other administrative assistant. It is unrealistic to expect to find the "360° man" - a man who's outstanding in every area - and the Trustees should be prepared to bolster their final choice in areas where he may be weak or unsuited - or just plain uninterested.

Having defined the job, the committee should next prepare for themselves a description of their "ideal" candidate - while realizing that they may have to settle for less. A suggested checklist might include two

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[2] Not only should they represent differing viewpoints within the Board, they should also represent diverse elements of the whole school constituency. A group with a broad spectrum of thinking is harder to pull together during the search process, but I'm convinced it ensures more real unity when the choice is finally made.

[3] We divided our committee into two parts: "Selection Committee" and "Search Advisers". In this way the Selection Committee of six was small and wieldy, but we were able to enlarge input and feedback through the Search Advisers group to include parents, faculty, students, alumnae and outside educators.

general categories: Qualifications and Characteristics. These might include:[4]

Qualifications

1. Evidence of leadership capacity
2. Academic Background
3. Teaching experience
4. Administrative experience
5. Public relations success
6. Fund-raising experience

Characteristics

1. Educational philosophy
2. Personality
3. Cultural background and interests
4. Wife and family
5. Social
6. Religious
7. Political
8. Age

Having analyzed and honestly described their school, and having analyzed and realistically described their expectations of the head, the search committee is almost ready to start looking at candidates. They should be aware of and avoid some ways of going about their search that may seem attractive but could be blind alleys. One of these is the "let's correct our last mistake" theory. ("Our last head was poor at public relations - so, whatever else we do, let's get a good PR man.") Another is the "25 year man" theory. ("This is a rough job and we never want to have to do it again while we're Trustees, so let's get a young man who'll be good for 25 years.") Another tempting road is "the great man's choice". ("Bill knows the president of Haverbury College and he has a man who he knows is just right for our school.") This may be fine, and the distinguished president may be right - but several fine candidates chosen by this method have landed on a school campus that was wrong for them, or vice versa.

The final consideration before actually starting to look for candidates is the timing of the process. The search committee must have sufficient lead time to do a careful, thorough job - unless it is unusually

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[4]We canvassed faculty, students, alumnae and friends for their priorities as to what a new head should be; then we wrote a description of "the perfect man" - that magic composite! We found that when we got too detailed about "must" qualities, we boxed ourselves in. Each person's priorities differed - but the "consensus composite" kept it general and workable.

lucky. It may have this time already, if the outgoing head has announced his planned retirement well in advance. But the "hunting season" in each school year is quite short. What with August vacations and the summer vagaries of many candidates, this season doesn't begin until after Labor Day - and it generally ends by late February, or early March. (While appointments are sometimes made in April, May or even June, the actual searches were generally concluded well before.) If the search committee is faced with a very short lead time, it may have to consider an acting head for a year, thus buying the necessary time. The acting head may come from inside or outside the school. A number of experienced, recently-retired, relatively youthful heads are generally available, who can step in on short notice. One veteran head is now in his 4th such assignment - all handled, as one might expect, with tact and success. An acting head is never an ideal solution, but it may be the best answer in a given situation.

B. The screening process

Where does the committee look for candidates? Both within the school and outside of it. And even if there is a very strong candidate (or more) within the school, a search should still be made. In this way, the "in-school" candidate is compared with other qualified men, and if he is ultimately chosen, both he and the Board will feel reassured by the fact that he met and mastered the competition.

Certainly the committee should spread its net wide. The aim at the outset should be to get names and brief resumes of as many prospects as possible.[5] There are many sources - NAIS maintains a clearinghouse service for this purpose; college placement bureaus often have strong candidates to suggest; veteran headmasters are very knowledgeable about possible candidates and can often suggest young "comers"; other Boards of Trustees who have recently gone through this process may still have their list of "finalists" which they probably will be willing to share with the committee - and they may even agree to reveal their ratings of these finalists. There are also a number of capable and experienced consultants who can do preliminary screening for the committee and assist in various other ways, always under the committee's direction. NAIS will be happy to suggest the names of experienced consultants.

As the committee begins to assemble a list of candidates, a

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[5] If you are writing to a possible candidate who is a member of a school's faculty, it is only courteous to write the school's head at the same time. We found this paid off.

winnowing or screening process begins.[6] It is a detailed and time-consuming process. Records of each candidate must be kept, references must be checked, and the candidates' qualifications must be matched against the profiles of the school and the job. Here the telephone can be very useful - for two reasons at least. It is fast - in contrast to the frequent delays in written correspondence - you get a prompt reply with the essential basic answers in short order. It is frank - a former or present employer will often give you a confidential and more honest estimate of the candidate than he will put into a "to-whom-it-may-concern" letter. But even as the processes of assembling and screening candidates' names and references is going on, the committee may wish to be moving further with certain obviously strong candidates. The reason for this is that many of the strong candidates may already be receiving feelers from other schools as well. And thus there develops a rather continuous turn-over of candidates. A man's name appears, his background is checked out, and the committee decides either to continue his candidacy or to end it. There is an obvious need to keep candidates informed of their status. When they are out of the running, let them know immediately. But there is frequently a time in this process when the search committee may feel like the management of the New England Patriots Football team. New faces are constantly arriving, old faces are disappearing, and a few fortunate faces seem destined to stay around for further treatment.

C. The interview

Here we shall be talking primarily about the formal interview at the school for candidates considered as top contenders by the search committee. Preliminary interviews[7] may be held either at the school, at a Trustee's office, or at the candidate's school during the initial process of investigating the

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[6]Before you have a "winnowing process" you have to write letters. We wrote to everyone anyone had suggested. We also said: "If you yourself are not interested, perhaps you can recommend someone else whom you feel to be qualified." I do not think the generally available source lists are enough to rely on. We went after those who were not "available" and thus turned up many interested candidates. The gathering process of names multiplied from answers to our letters. The letters went out constantly and each reply was acknowledged.

[7]One or two of us on the Selection Committee had preliminary interviews with every interesting candidate. I could not do these interviews in less than four hours each, but I learned more from this experience than anything else. My written reports helped other committee members feel they "knew" the candidate. It is helpful to have women on the committee to see candidates (and their families) in their "home territory", and to take the time to do the donkey work before any "formal" interviewing takes place.

candidate, but what we are concerned with here is the serious, formal interview reserved for candidates who are being given truly serious consideration. To be really effective a formal interview of this type must be carefully planned and organized. The committee should consider carefully in setting up its arrangements just exactly what it feels the Board should learn from such an interview about the candidate and what the Board wishes the candidate to learn about the total school situation. The way in which arrangements for such a formal interview are handled will tell the mature, thoughtful candidate a good deal about the quality of the Board and its interest in the school. Don't <u>just</u> socialize - although a social time over the teacups may tell you some useful things about the candidate and his wife. And speaking of wives, don't neglect the wife. Not only is she an important part of the team, but she may well influence her husband's final decision. So, see to it that other wives[8] (both Trustee and faculty) give her complete information on the school, the community, its resources and educational and cultural opportunities, and all the things that a wife and mother wants to know about a possible move to a new locale, a new home, and a new environment.

Obviously there will be numerous questions - and it should be remembered that these questions will come both from the Board and from the candidate. Since this is not an interrogation but an interview, it is useful if Trustees phrase their questions rather generally, giving the candidate scope to shape his answers and to convey to the Trustees his philosophy. On their part, the Trustees should be ready to answer the candidates' questions factually and honestly. Since he has come as far in this process as an interview, the candidate is obviously being given serious consideration. Hence, honesty on both sides is of the essence. However bad the school's finances may be, tell him the truth. He'll find out anyway if he takes the job, and better to find out from the Board now than for himself later on.

It is also important that candidates have an opportunity to exchange ideas with various other members of the school community. If he becomes the head he will be dealing with the teachers and students every day, so an exchange during a visit to the school would seem not only reasonable but important. And in light of the present climate of student opinion in independent schools, this seems more important today perhaps than in previous years. However, the candidate should not be tossed "cold" into a roomful of students - or teachers for that matter - on a sort of catch-as-

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[8]You assume here that your Trustees and faculty are <u>men</u> when you suggest that "wives" see the wife (If, indeed, your candidate is a man.) I imagine that just as many girls' schools are head-hunting, and since these schools include female Trustees and members of the Administration and faculty, I implore you not to make us accessories!

catch-can basis. This can backfire, and in some cases it has.[9] Parents and alumni are also important parts of the school family, and the Board should give thought to include them at this time also. With all candidates who are being seriously enough considered to come to the school for a formal interview, it is important to go over carefully all questions of salary, raises, retirement provisions, and perquisites.[10] No candidate is going to take this job to get rich, but a clear and complete outlining of these important matters can help to give him a more specific picture of what he faces and to remove uncertainties.

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[9] I don't think faculty and students should be lumped together for these sessions. We asked each candidate how he would like this to work and without exception, those nine who got as far as visiting the school wanted to come (as "visitors interested in finding out more about the school") and have visits scheduled with faculty departments and student groups. We were interested in the opinions of students and faculty after these visits and arranged meetings at the school for this purpose.

We told the students this was not a popularity contest, but that their opinions were an important part of the total input. In actual fact, they did not "choose" the Head, but they helped us eliminate some candidates. Their response was extraordinarily mature; meeting and discussing "philosophy" with the visitors became a looked-forward-to highlight of the fall term for both faculty and students - and there was not a candidate who did not leave the school more interested than when he had arrived.

[10] I would break down C. The interview into three subheadings:

1. Preliminary interviews (See Note 7)
2. Campus visits (See Note 9)
3. Finalist interviews

As we did it, we held about 40 to 50 preliminary interviews, nine campus visits and three finalists' interviews. These last three involved meeting with all Trustees (we felt this was an important step, as it was not the committee's job to invite the candidate to take the position, simply to propose him to the whole Board as our choice; therefore it was most helpful to have had the entire Board meet him prior to the special meeting called to make the final decision). It wasn't until these finalist interviews that policy understandings and financial agreements were fully outlined by the Chairman of the Board, though we had, of course, outlined these earlier in a general way.

D. The final step

The committee, after consideration of all candidates, should settle on its number one choice for the job. The committee should then go to that individual and inform him that he is the committee's first choice and that the job is his when, after a final review of all considerations, a mutually satisfactory understanding on philosophy, objectives for the school, policy, and principles of operation has been reached. It is assumed that the candidate has already avowed his sincere interest in the position and will accept the appointment if such understanding is achieved. At this time when both parties have made a commitment, it is possible for them to talk freely and candidly with each other, and they should talk at length, for what is agreed upon in these conversations will surely be the foundation for the working relationship between the headmaster and the Board of Trustees.

In these conversations all areas concerning the school should be explored with complete candor on both sides. The Trustees should state their position[11] without equivocation on all substantive matters, and the prospective headmaster should reveal his own ideas and convictions. For example, if the Board wants a restrictive enrollment policy, that should be made clear to the candidate, who in turn must decide if he can accept such a policy, live with it and implement it. When a Board does not reveal its position on such matters, it is deluding the person who must carry out its policies. Similarly, a man who takes a headmastership and does not disclose that his personal convictions are contrary to the stated policies of the Board does so under false pretenses. Admittedly, it is difficult to cover every item of policy and that policy is not always perfectly clear, but unless most basic policy has been established, the Trustees are in no position to engage a headmaster. It is essential that complete and precise understandings on as many basic questions as possible be established at this stage, before the headmastership is formally offered and accepted. One might think of the interviews and the initial exchanges of information as the preliminary phase, and the conversations in which policy understandings and agreements are worked out as the critical phase. It is in the critical phase that all possible issues should be resolved so that there may be a minimum area in which future conflict may develop. If understandings are reached on basic questions, then and only then should an agreement for the employment of the headmaster be drawn up.

In capsule form it could be said that a sound and effective working relationship between a headmaster and a Board of Trustees will develop

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[11] More and more there are different positions within a Board on various specific policies. I feel it's not only fair but vital for a candidate to learn these before "locking himself in" with a Board.

successfully if and only if at the time of the appointment of the headmaster these elements exist:

1. Both the prospective headmaster and the selection committee are adequately informed as to the scope of the headmastership and the work and responsibilities it entails.

2. There has been a frank and open exchange of information on all relevant matters between the parties.

3. A mutually satisfactory understanding has been acheived between the parties on all basic issues of policy, and it has been arrived at <u>after</u> both parties have made a definite commitment to each other as to the position.

4. An agreement setting out the employment conditions for the headmaster has been established.

E. <u>Epilogue - After the selection</u>

Once the Trustees have voted (unanimously, we hope) and they have their man, the last formality is to compose and send a letter about the new head to all the school's constituency (and all his, by courtesy). Do not forget to include those with whom the committee has had any correspondence. This is good public relations for the school and helps the new head to begin with a knowledgeable and sympathetic audience.

Part II

To the Candidates

A. Think before you act

Probably no teacher in an independent school has failed to give at least passing thought to the possibility of becoming a head. He is most likely to have done so at a time when, frustrated by apparent insensitivity, indifference or lack of understanding on the part of his head, he mutters to himself: "If I ever get to be a head, I'll handle this kind of thing right!" But even in calmer, more sober moments this vision may persist, and he finds himself wondering: "What kind of a head would I make?"

Obviously in the headship lies the power to put some of your educational ideas into effect, the income to put your children through college, and the probability of greater recognition. But here you may well pause. For the headmaster in any school is indeed in the limelight - through most of his waking hours. The position itself will change your life - and that of your wife and family. And all of them had better be in on the discussion and decision before you take the plunge. Never was a head's job more challenging and demanding than it is today.

B. How do you make your candidacy known?

First of all, you discuss your ambitions with your headmaster. This is not only courteous but sensible. Your head's recommendation is possibly the most important factor in advancing your candidacy. If you want to get your name on the lists of the NAIS Clearinghouse Service, this can be done only through your headmaster. Also your head can personally advance your candidacy, informally, in a wide variety of ways. You should use your college placement office if there is one, making sure that your resume and recommendations are up to date. There are also commercial agencies with which you can register, but most of these place relatively few headmasters. In any event, you should spread your net as widely as possible.

While candidates occasionally become heads only a few months after making their decision, normally it takes quite a while - even several years. So the quest to become a head requires patience and wisdom, and meanwhile the would-be head must labor away conscientiously at his daily job. In fact, for many candidates, it is the process of growth, maturing, and self-preparation to gain a headmastership that finally brings them the prize.

C. The interview

This obviously is a key time for the candidate, since the Trustees invite him to an interview only when they are seriously considering him for

the head's job. Thus it is important for you to do your homework thoroughly before any interview. You should have thought through your own educational philosophy, clearly and cogently. This need not be formalized in writing - although some Boards may ask for a written statement - but you should be prepared to explain your philosophy and to do so coherently and succinctly. You should learn in advance all you can about the school you are visiting - and should know what questions you want to ask about that school. And you should not be afraid of asking searching questions - courteously and gently phrased, of course. If you are to commit your life (and that of your family) to a school, you are entitled to find out all you can about it - good and bad. You should discuss the whole idea of the interview with your wife, in considerable detail. She will be interviewed too, and her judgement of the opportunity may well figure in your final decision.

The average candidate seldom "wins" on his first interview. But there has to be a first try, and the experience can be invaluable in preparing you to do better on the next one. The second time around you will be better able to "keep your cool", think clearly, phrase your thoughts and questions effectively, and generally make a stronger impression.

During the interview the Trustees' questions may be searching and demanding, or may seem obvious and inane, but they are all designed for one purpose - to test you, both as to the substance of your answers and the way you go about answering them. You can doubtless anticipate many of them and at least think about your response. Be prepared to live with all of your answers, and don't be afraid to say: "I don't know". Your own questions, while diplomatically phrased, should be as searching and complete as you feel necessary to enable you to find out what you need to know about the school and its students. As independent schools today become less autocratic and hierarchical, the attitude and opinions of the various members of the school "family" have become increasingly important. As a result, in most interviews today there is opportunity for a session (or sessions) with other members of the school family - students, teachers, parents, alumni. The Trustees should have prepared the way for you in an interview with these elements of the school family, laying down certain "ground rules" for these sessions - but they may not have. Thus it is well for you to inquire as to the nature and number of interviews that you will have when you visit the school. If the Trustees have not arranged for you to meet other elements of the school family, it is perfectly proper for you to request that they do so. In any event, you should realize that interviews with students, teachers, parents or alumni may very well be quite different and less well structured than interviews with the Trustees. If such an event occurs, you are "on your own." While interviews of this sort should not be a popularity contest, a light touch and a sense of humor are valuable at such times. Also the candidate is certainly entitled to ask questions of these groups as well as answering theirs - and you should do so.

D. Final bargaining

If you are offered a headship, don't make your decision before every one of your questions has been answered to your satisfaction. Often a young candidate is so eager to show a Board what he can do that he accepts the head's job with some major areas of policy left vague and undiscussed - only to find that one or more of these areas are vital to the functioning of his school. For example, if the Board favors a restricted admissions policy, whether it has been explicitly stated or not, a newly-appointed head may find himself in real trouble if he changes it. A clash between Board and head on such a policy matter may lead to great unhappiness and tension - even to the head's early separation from the school.

Before you agree to take the job, be sure that all the mechanical details of your employment are fully discussed and clearly understood.[12] Your best bargaining time is before you are hired. Check out your salary, your vacation, your retirement, arrangements for your childrens' education, and the Board's thinking on salary increases and perquisites. To illustrate the last point, let us suppose the school provides the head with a school-owned house. If it needs refurbishing, the time to agree on this is before you become headmaster. Because after you've become the head, when you have to find the money in the school budget to do it, you may feel the school can't afford it, despite your wife's pleas.

It would be well for you to discuss with the President of the Board how best the two of you can cooperate and work smoothly together. A useful arrangement for such a purpose is an annual scheduled talk between the two of you - about your working conditions, a raise in salary, and your good and bad performances during the past year - just as you will have such sessions with your faculty. This will enable Board and head to avoid a build-up of relatively petty misunderstandings and dissatisfaction that might otherwise grow to serious proportions.

E. The decision

Finally, if the school has offered you the position and you know you want it, run over a short check list to make sure that you and the

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[12]Even after an understanding has been reached, you're bound to be in for surprises. No selection committee (however well informed or candid) can possibly make you aware of the enormous variety of problems and challenges you'll come up against. The incumbent headmaster can often be helpful, but try to talk with others at the school as well. The more you can learn about the school between the time your appointment is announced and the day you take office, the better off you'll be.

Board have discussed and agreed on the key issues. The list might include:

1. Exactly what does the Board expect of the head?
2. What is the school's philosophy - now, and in the immediate future (Next ten years)?
3. What are the faculty hiring policies?
4. What are the admissions policies?
5. Are there other important or distinctive policies that should be discussed?
6. How do the Trustees see their role, responsibilities, and areas of authority?

Thus only, and last, when all questions on both sides have been answered (or explored fully) and all decisions that can be made have been made - sign on the dotted line, and enter into the joys and griefs of headmastering.